CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION
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Arun Joshi is one of the "Over-written" authors, although he has to date four novels to his credit. This suggests that the novels are complex and there can be no final utterance on any text which has thematic complexity and sophisticated organisation. Moreover, Joshi seems to have greater affinity with a mystic and philosophical novelist like Raja Rao than with a writer of commitment like Mulk Raj Anand. This implies that Joshi has firm links with the Indian past, especially with the medieval Bhakti cult. He is in this sense an artist whose art articulates the socio-cultural issues of the post-independent India. There is something Indian about Joshi's novels and as Gokak rightly observes, "the extent of the Indianness of work of art will depend upon the intensity and manifoldness with which an Indian writer responds to his tradition and recreates it in his own consciousness."¹ Joshi's critics have explained his fictions as "interior landscapes"² and have been quick to notice his affiliation with the aesthetic existentialists


²C.N.Srinath, 'Arun Joshi: the Novel of Interior Landscape', The Literary Criterion, 12, Nos. 2 & 3 (1976), pp. 115-34.
like Dostoevsky, Kafka, Camus and a Catholic writer like Greene and an exponent of Middle East culture like Lawrence Durrell. This bewildering assessment of influence and affiliations perhaps obscure the nature and quality of experience Joshi's fictions convey.

The European Existentialist thought is not a unified and well articulated system. Most British philosophers do not consider it as a philosophy. But this does not mean that it has no value and a number of British and American novelists have seen in it a strong reinforcement for their own artistic concerns. Deriving from German Romanticism and the Danish theologian Sorel Kierkegaard, existentialism emphasises the importance of individuality against the excess of rationality. While the French Existentialists like Sartre move towards atheist existentialism, Kierkegaard and his followers have championed the cause of Christianity and are called Christian Existentialists. A close reading of Joshi's novels seem to suggest that he has much in common with the Kierkegaardian thought. According to Kierkegaard man can discover


4 Ramakrishna Rao, A, 'The Image of Labyrinth in Borges, Durrell and Joshi' in Glimpses of Indo-English Fiction, Ed. O.P. Saxena (New Delhi, Jainsons Publications 1985)
himself and can understand the human situation only through leaps, decisions, and not by means of rational deductions from first premises. A first premise is first only because man makes it so; because he determines by a deliberate act of choice that at that point he will begin. Similarly, a major step on the way of truth is a free decision. Our progress, according to Kierkegaard "from the aesthetic to the scientific point of view, and then again to the scientific from the ethical, and from the ethical to the religious cannot be rationalised into an orderly, formally justifiable step from premises to conclusions: it is in each case a leap to a quite new way of looking at things."5

Margaret L. Wiley argues that "in Existentialism the West has, for almost the first time in its culturally adolescent experience, came close to the kind of epistemological dilemmas and moral decisions out of which Indian concepts were, perhaps first wrought."6 This may be the reason for Joshi's critics labelling him as an existentialist – but as we have already suggested, Joshi has absorbed the Kierkegaardian view of existence and recreated it in terms of Indian


tradition. The word tradition in the Indian context is not easy to define. There are, broadly speaking, two traditions in Indian thought. The older one may be called the transcendental tradition. The Vedas, the Upanishads and the Gita, the devotional literature of ancient and medieval India constitute this tradition. The later one may be christened humanistic tradition. The Gandhian ethic may be subsumed under this category. In Indian Fiction in English, Raja Rao exemplifies the first and Mulk Raj Anand the second. Any reader of Arun Joshi can easily see that he belongs to the tradition exemplified by Raja Rao. But the critical issue that confronts any reader of Raja Rao or Joshi is the way in which these writers have fictionalised their understanding, assimilation and awareness of this tradition. Strictly speaking, Joshi's novels emerge out of psychological realism in which the narrative focus is on the man within. Since this kind of narrative is a later development in the history of English Fiction, an Indian novelist has no alternative but to think of the Western narrative models which represent consciousness. He has these models in Flaubert, James, Ford, and
Conrad. In the narrative mode exemplified by these writers the major narrative device is narrative discontinuity; but what is surprising to a reader of Joshi's novels is that in his four novels Joshi employs the first person narration. As Percy Lubbock pointed out long ago, the use of the first person, no doubt, is a source of release to the novelist in the matter of composition. It composes of its own accord, or so he may feel; for the hero gives the story an indefeasible unity by the mere act of telling it. His career may not seem to hang together logically, artistically; but every part of it is at least united with every part by the coincidence of its all belonging to one man. 7

when the protagonist himself narrates history he suffers from certain aesthetic limitation in the sense that there is no alternative version for assessing and verifying the experience narrated. Joshi seems to overcome this limitation by adhering to a pattern reinforced by a subtle use of certain motifs. For example, in the 'Foreigner' the dominating motif is narration as therapy. Sindi Oberoi's

reflections, reminiscence and off-hand statements are controlled by the therapeutic metaphor. In *The Last Labyrinth* death motif is a recurring feature supported by the dominating symbols, labyrinth and void. In *Billy Biswas* Billy's story is narrated by Romesh Sahai which is a Conradian device which Fitzgerald also uses in *The Great Gatsby*. *The Apprentice* is almost a sort of monologue imposed with 'corruption' as the dominant motif. These points are further explored and discussed in the chapters on the individual texts. Suffice it to say here that Joshi's novels appear to be well organised and exhibit a certain technical finish. This may be one of the reasons for his high rating in the academic establishment. But what attracts a student of the novel is the thematic complexity and textural density in Joshi's texts.

*The Foreigner* dramatises the career of Sindi Oberoi in terms of detachment and involvement. Sindi's self receives serious shocks and jolts for the obvious reason that detachment and involvement is not an adolescent affair but bristles with problems for which there are no readymade solutions. Sindi's wounded self undergoes a healing process when he
chooses to get involved in the affairs of Khemka's firm. He seems to acquire a certain dynamism of action which free choice brings. This theme receives a complex treatment in the later novels. The entire corpus of Joshi's fiction may be viewed as a process of making the self. Reflecting on his sad relationship with Kathay, Sindi says "Even after several years somewhere in the labyrinth of my consciousness, the wound still bled" (emphasis added).

Romesh Sahai, the narrator of the Strange Case of Billy Biswas at the very outset tells us, "If life's meaning lives not in the glossy surfaces of our pretensions but in those dark mossy labyrinths of soul that languish forever hidden from the dazzling light of the Sun, then I do not know of any man who sought it mere doggedly, and, having received a signal abandoned himself so recklessly to its call" (emphasis added).

In the above passages we find that Joshi associates labyrinth with consciousness and soul and discovers life's meaning or making sense of life depends on one's intuitive


perception in making a choice and firmly pursuing it.

Himmat Singh in the 'Apprentice' says, "My soul was killed. You put yours to pawn, but souls that are pawned could perhaps be retrieved .... may be souls are like muscles Ratan Rather, may be to develop them one has first put them to use." 8

It follows that retrieving souls or rehabilitating the self can be achieved only by action, and action depends on the dynamics of choice.

In the Last Labyrinth we find that the image of Labyrinth is juxtaposed with the image of void which is repeated pretty often in the text. Labyrinths and Voids appear to be the two modes of making sense of life. The self has the freedom to choose one or the other in its search for life's meaning. In the following chapters an attempt has been made to offer a reading of Joshi's texts within the framework outlined above.

8 Arun Joshi, The Apprentice (Delhi, Orient Paper back; 1974), p.84.